Under Secretary of Commerce for the Oceans and Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator
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Opening remarks to the Smithsonian Resident Associates " Demystifying Seafood: The Ocean and Its Bounty" event

As delivered

Good evening! Welcome to this Smithsonian Resident Associate Program's event in the Baird Auditorium!

Tonight's program is designed to tantalize your mind and titillate your taste buds!

The intellectual appetizer will offer a look at the Gulf one year after Deepwater Horizon and I'm anxious to hear views of the great panel assembled.

Let's begin by sharing some behind-the-scenes information that bears on tonight's venue and program. I refer to the strong partnership between the Smithsonian and NOAA that began well over 100 years.

NOAA Fisheries was created in 1871 as the U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries. It was the very first federal agency concerned with natural resource conservation and science. Its first Commissioner was none other than Spencer Baird – for whom this Auditorium was named – the same Spencer Baird who was also Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. (Imagine doing both of those jobs today!)

140 years later - NOAA's collaborations with the Smithsonian remain strong. We share the world's largest collection of fishes, with NOAA's Fisheries Systematics laboratory scientists working closely with Smithsonian ichthyologists. Our partnership extends to all manner of marine sciences, education, and conservation -- a relationship evident throughout the fabulous Sant Ocean Hall.

Tonight's event reflects this partnership in science and conservation – and it's appropriate that we do so in the Baird Auditorium.

Turning to the subject of tonight's event.

Last April, Deepwater Horizon exploded upon the scene in the Gulf. An unprecedented environmental disaster, the Deepwater Horizon spill oiled over 1000 miles of shoreline.

Ten days into the spill, I met with more than 100 fishermen in Plaquemines Parish who feared losing their way of life and the Gulf they know and love. They knew better than anyone that oil seeping into the nursery wetlands where larvae develop into juvenile fish might mean an uncertain future. Their connection to the bayous and Gulf waters, and their concerns about losing it, were palpable. And they were right to be concerned. Many of them have suffered terribly, and their businesses and communities were devastated.

Fast forward to today: Although the vast majority of the oil in the Gulf is now gone, oil lingers close to shore in many coastal areas in Louisiana. And the effects on Gulf ecosystems and communities will be felt for years.

A cooperative Natural Resource Damage Assessment is well underway, but it will be years before we have a clear picture of the full impact of the oil on Gulf ecosystems and communities.

But while we await more complete information about the damage done and the future implications, we do know the status of seafood today. All federal waters of the Gulf once closed to fishing due to the spill – 37 percent of federal waters in total -- are now open. And they are open for the simple reason that the seafood therein has been thoroughly tested for oil and dispersant contamination and found to be safe to eat. NOAA, FDA, and the states tested seafood extensively prior to re-opening areas, and they continue to ensure the safety of Gulf seafood through additional surveillance and testing. If new oil appears that may be a threat to seafood safety, we will not hesitate to close waters again.

But our focus on the status of seafood in the Gulf should be about more than simply answering the question: Is Gulf seafood safe from oil and dispersant contaminants? The larger focus must also include what we are doing to ensure healthy fisheries, healthy Gulf ecosystems, and healthy sources of seafood – the foundations of the unique culture and the special attraction for so many visitors to the Gulf. The health of the Gulf is inseparable from the health of its coastal communities, economies and culture.

Our efforts in support of a healthy Gulf are multiple – from ending overfishing to habitat restoration to making Gulf coast ecosystems, communities and economies more resilient to devastation from disasters such as hurricanes, floods, oil spills, climate change and ocean acidification.

Devastation from hurricane after hurricane - Katrina in 2005, Rita on its heels, then Gustav and Ike in 2008 - has given Gulf communities keen insights into the consequences of losing barrier islands and wetlands, and the protection they used to provide as 'speed bumps for hurricanes.' With hurricane season about to begin, and the devastating power of the Mississippi tragically apparent, it has never been more critical to take a hard look at what is essential to building Gulf Coast resiliency and rebuilding the wetlands and barrier islands that provide protection.

Now, restoration is not a silver bullet, but it can help on many levels. Past experience shows that restoration yields significant economic as well as environmental pay-off, creating jobs and further opening the way for more travel and recreation, adding income for restaurants, hotels and coastal economies. And healthy ecosystems provide major benefits such as hurricane protection, pollution control and improved consumer confidence in seafood, benefits that stretch far beyond the Gulf.

As we begin the long road to environmental and economic recovery in the Gulf – NOAA is pursuing efforts on numerous fronts to ensure progress. Thus far I've touched on seafood safety, ending overfishing, and habitat restoration -- all of which are key elements in a vibrant, resilient future for the Gulf. I'd like to touch briefly on one additional component that complements those above: aquaculture.

The farming of marine plants and animals has huge potential to provide healthy seafood, create new jobs, and contribute to reducing the trade deficit. However, it is vitally important that aquaculture be conducted in a fashion that is environmentally sound and economically feasible.

I am pleased to announce that today NOAA and the Department of Commerce released our new aquaculture polices. These policies establish a framework intended to encourage sustainable domestic aquaculture, support coastal communities and important commercial and recreational fisheries, and help restore species and habitat.

In addition to the policies, we are also committing to:

- Develop a National Shellfish Initiative in partnership with the industry to take specific steps to increase commercial production of shellfish and promote innovation in the industry, and
- Implement the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Plan for Aquaculture, which includes the regulatory infrastructure needed for offshore aquaculture development in the Gulf.

We hope that both of these initiatives will have profound and lasting effects on environmental and economic recovery in the Gulf and on aquaculture development throughout the nation.

With that, I'll turn it over to our panel moderator, National Public Radio's Richard Harris.